

# DRIVER'S SEAT

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## Branch Certification and Career Progression

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For some time now, our enlisted branch managers have used the phrase "branch qualification" when discussing assignments and career development. Visiting the force, I find that many tankers and scouts feel that this phrase is an "officer thing," which should not be applied to NCOs. Most say that, under the "select, train, promote" system, an NCO is "qualified" for a rank upon promotion to the rank.

I say, look beyond the phrase, and look at the need.

As much as our force is shrinking, restructuring, and changing, we need a system to give consistent focus to the fourth step in leadership development; the step following "select, train, promote." That step is "certify." Assign the newly promoted NCO into the critical leadership position for his grade, and allow him enough time to gain experience and to demonstrate success before shifting him to staff or other special assignments. Branch leadership certification is as critical to developing the NCO as "branch qualification" is to developing the officer. A branch-certified NCO has fulfilled the first, critical requirement which prepares him for promotion and greater responsibility. The need for branch-certified NCOs will guide Armor branch as they assign and reassign, will guide me as I advise centralized promotion boards, and should guide commanders and enlisted leaders as they develop NCOs.

The branch-certifying positions are: tank gunner and scout squad leader; tank commander and scout section leader; platoon sergeant; first sergeant. The certifying period is between 18 and 24 months, enough time to go through at least one and possibly two annual training cycles and enough time to receive two or three NCOERs, and to show a pattern of success and to have potential for greater responsibility assessed by two different leaders. Special credit may still

have to be given to 12-month Korea tours, for many will leave Korea leadership tours for special assignments. Leaders must not assume that Korea is enough, they should return to the line as soon as possible to recertify as a leader, and continue to excel.

At Armor Branch, SFCs Perez and Morris must fill the special assignments: drill sergeant, recruiter, instructor, active component supporting reserve component (AC/RC), and observer/controller (O/C). These assignments have priority over line units (due to DA policy or congressional mandate), and duty on these special assignments lasts between two and three years. In all cases but recruiter, the NCO must be branch-certified as a tank gunner/commander, scout squad/section leader, or tank/scout platoon sergeant before he can be assigned to such duty. Take an uncertified NCO, send him into any of these assignments, and we place that NCO well behind his peers in professional development. We are assigning some uncertified E5(P)s and E6s to recruiting duty, for lack of anyone else to send. Our force is that short of certified E6 leaders, and the need to fill special assignments is that great. I do not like it one bit, but cannot do anything about it but try to reduce the number of Armor NCOs required to go on recruiting duty (not the fault of DA Armor Branch; these decisions are made echelons above them).

Even in the best circumstances, NCOs will often leave their branch-certifying positions after the minimum time to go into special assignments. I expect our branch managers to ensure that as many soldiers as possible have had the time to certify, and I expect the soldiers to go on these assignments proudly and to do the job well. There will be no ranking of these special assignments as "best" to "worst," as I advise the centralized boards. All special assignments are critical to maintaining a healthy force. All

will be given the same emphasis in centralized board instructions. NCOs, do the best you can to maintain branch proficiency (easier for an O/C than a recruiter) and return to the line to certify or recertify as a leader of scouts and tankers. Unit leaders, do not assign soldiers coming off special assignments to the staff; put them back into the line and insist that they succeed as leaders.

The Armor School has begun to develop distance-learning aids to assist in maintaining MOS proficiency. That is the most valuable use for the distance-learning materials in NCOES.

As I brief the centralized boards, I am insisting that only branch-certified leaders be considered as ready for promotion. The Master Gunner Course is an excellent career enhancer for a promotable sergeant or staff sergeant, but they must serve as a platoon sergeant before going on to be the battalion "mike golf." Staff work is important, but NCOs must certify as a leader first and then show their versatility. Don't avoid first sergeant; it is the only job that shows the ability to be an excellent sergeant major or command sergeant major. No uncertified E8 is being considered for a special assignment. MSG Brantley, at branch, is making sure of that.

As the career professional development program is rewritten, "branch certification" will assume even greater importance. Units must manage their sergeants to enable as many as possible to have success in the critical leadership positions. Soldiers must do their best in whatever positions they are placed, but they must eagerly seek the branch-certifying leadership positions. I must ensure that the certified leaders are considered first by the promotion boards. The armored force will have the leaders that our soldiers require and deserve.

"SERGEANT TAKE THE LEAD"